

Government policy decisions may have negative impact on child wellbeing

New research has found that recent government policy decisions relating to One Parent Family Payments and tax credits for non-main carers could have negative impacts for child health and wellbeing.

The findings are the results of an analysis of the Growing Up In Ireland longitudinal study of parents and children in Ireland carried out by Treoir, the National Specialist Information Service for unmarried parents and their children. The Growing Up In Ireland study collected data at two time points, wave 1 when the infants were nine months old and again when they were three years old, wave 2.

While Irish three-year-olds are generally doing well regardless of their family background –

married, cohabiting, or solo parent – those whose parents suffered from income or educational disadvantage were impacted negatively. These negative impacts include a higher level of obesity, greater incidence of parent-child conflict, and poor socio-behavioural development.

The aims of the study were to investigate differences in outcomes for unmarried-cohabitant, solo & married parents in the areas of childcare, parents' health and parenting, child health and wellbeing, and work and welfare.

The main finding was that outcomes for children at age three are similar on many indicators across these areas irrespective of their family type – married, cohabiting or solo parent. Where children are doing well in married families they tend to be doing well in other types of family also. However solo parents face a range of difficulties and challenges that can impact negatively on their children. Solo parents faced particular income challenges with one in two solo parent families classified as at

risk of poverty as opposed to just 1 in 4 families overall.

The impact of the recession was also evidenced by the fact that 43% of all respondents reported that 'making ends meet' was more difficult at wave 2 than they had indicated at wave 1.

“We see no differences between family types in a range of areas”, noted author of the report Dr Owen Corrigan. “Parents from all family types engage in learning activities and games with their infants to the same degree; there are no differences in the behavioural difficulties of children from unmarried-cohabitant as opposed to married parent families. Childcare difficulties impact on all types of family. Differences in these areas and in approaches to, say, negative parenting styles or bad dietary habits are generally explained by differences in income, education and other factors, but not family type per se.”

A core principle of Treoir is that children have a right to know and be cared for by both

parents. Two out of three children in the study were in contact with their non-resident father at age three. However, 54% of non-resident fathers made no financial contribution towards the upkeep of their child. “It is essential that the barriers to shared parenting are removed and non-resident fathers are encouraged and facilitated to be involved in their children’s lives”, said Treoir chief executive Margaret Dromey.

“Some policy decisions such as the removal of tax credit for non-main carers, mainly fathers, impact negatively on maintenance payments and the current family legislation inhibits involvement of fathers. The government should re-examine these decisions in order to encourage more participation by fathers in their children’s lives.”

It was found that difficulties in arranging childcare can affect solo parents disproportionately. Some 18% of solo parents reported that childcare difficulties prevented them looking for a job at wave 1 of the study,

compared to 6% of married parents who reported a similar difficulty.

The fact that two waves of data were used for this report allowed for an analysis of how childcare difficulties experienced by families at wave 1 may have impacted on outcomes two years later at wave 2. Looking at those families where the primary caregiver became unemployed over time, the data showed a relationship between problems caused by childcare difficulties and transition into unemployment. Where training for work or where study was prevented at wave 1 due to childcare difficulties this was associated with a higher probability of moving into unemployment by wave 2. Difficulties arranging childcare, and the negative impacts that can entail, affect parents of all types.

“The difficulties affected solo parents disproportionately”, said Senator Jillian van Turnhout “Targeting childcare subsidies for solo parents seeking to improve their education or actively seeking work could help solo parents take up work and training opportunities. Some

subsidised schemes exist but the promised Swedish model is a long way off.”

Other factors that can impact on child development include the health and wellbeing of parents and the report also looked at the health of parents and at issues such as reported stress levels and parental scores on an index of depression.

“These are important issues as previous research has linked them closely to negative child development in terms of social, emotional and behavioural outcomes”, said Dr Corrigan. “The results show that those who were affected by crisis pregnancy were seen to record significantly higher levels of maternal stress than those who were not affected by crisis pregnancy, three years after birth. This is an interesting finding and one that should inform research on crisis pregnancy in Ireland and elsewhere. Other factors likewise were seen to be associated with higher levels of maternal stress, such as difficulties arising due to lack of childcare. The findings also indicate that solo

parents suffer from higher levels of stress, and that higher stress is associated with undesirable parent-child relationship aspects.”

The report also looks at child health and wellbeing. One area of pressing concern is the issue of child obesity. Obese children are more likely to be ill or to miss school and to require more medical care than normal weight children. Obese as well as overweight children are also more likely to become obese adults, with a greater risk of disability or premature mortality in adulthood.

Recent research has shown that obesity now affects one in 20 Irish infants. The findings here show how obesity affects all family types with an equal likelihood. Obesity cuts right across different family types. Dietary habits appear to show some variation in terms of the incidence of allowing unhealthy foods like chips or fizzy drinks. However, these unhealthy dietary habits are more due to differences in income and education than they are due to family type.

Finally, the report raises questions in relation to the current policy relating to the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). Those who entered into receipt of this payment between the two waves of the study were more than twice as likely to have improved their educational level over time. “The current policy of the Department of Social Protection is to move OPFP recipients into employment but Treoir questions if some recent decisions are contrary to this policy with the earnings disregard reduced from €146 to €90 already and to €60 by 2016”, said Dr. Ruth Barrington, Chair of Treoir.

Evidence presented in the report indicates that OPFP may have helped mothers into work: those claiming OPFP were more likely to have transitioned into employment by the time their child was 3 years old, where they hadn't previously been working at the time their child was nine months. Claiming OPFP may have been the crutch that allowed non-working mothers to move into employment, given that it allowed those mothers to earn and to claim the benefit

at the same time. Policy changes to the way this welfare benefit work are likely to have negative implications for the educational and labour market attainment of solo parents.

The data for the report were collected over a period of extreme economic difficulty for Ireland. “This allows us to look not only at how families differ in terms of their outcomes at a given time point, but to see how things may have changed over time”, Dr Corrigan noted. “As such it is and will continue to be an extremely powerful and important resource for social scientists, policymakers and anyone interested in the welfare of parents and children in Ireland. So I’d like to commend the Growing Up in Ireland study for their hard work and dedication on such an important area.”

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